

IN THE CLAIMS

Please amend the claims as follows:

1. (Currently Amended): A process for the production of a semifinished leather product from an animal hide, the process comprising:

pretanning an animal hide with a chromium-free tanning agent to produce a pretanned animal hide,

wherein

pretanning is effected with the additional use of a clay mineral which, after stirring for 30 minutes in water at 50°C at a circumferential rotor speed of from 5 to 25 m/s, has a ~~number average particle diameter of less than 2 µm or~~ a bimodal size distribution with a first, finely divided fraction whose number average particle diameter is less than 0.5 µm and a second, coarser fraction whose number average particle diameter is less than 5 µm, in each case determined by the method according to ISO 13320-1, by combined laser light diffraction and light scattering, the proportion of the first, finely divided fraction being from 10 to 90% by weight, and

~~wherein~~ the pretanned animal hide is dried to a water content of from 5 to 45%, based on the total weight of the semifinished leather product.

2. (Currently Amended): The process as claimed in claim 1, wherein the chromium-free tanning agent for the pretanning is selected from the group consisting of an aldehyde tanning agent, an isocyanate, an aluminum salt, an oxazolidine and tetrakis(hydroxymethyl)phosphonium chloride ~~aldehyde tanning agents, isocyanates, aluminum salts, oxazolidines and tetrakis(hydroxymethyl)phosphonium chloride.~~

3. (Previously Presented): The process as claimed in claim 1, wherein the pretanned animal hide is dried to a water content of from 15 to 35%, based on the total weight of the semifinished leather product.

4. (Canceled).

5. (Previously Presented): The process as claimed in claim 1, wherein substances which, owing to their chemical structure, form strong hydrogen bonds with the clay mineral, are added to the clay mineral before or during the use thereof in the pretanning.

6. (Previously Presented): The process as claimed in claim 1, wherein the clay mineral is a phyllosilicate.

7. (Currently Amended): The process as claimed in claim 6, wherein the phyllosilicate is selected from the group consisting of a kaolinite, a muscovite, a montmorillonite, a smectite, a saponite, a vermiculite, a hallosite, a bentonite and organically modified variants ~~thereof~~ these phyllosilicates.

8. (Currently Amended): The process as claimed in claim 1, wherein the drying is carried out under conditions selected from the group consisting of at ambient temperature and ambient pressure, under reduced pressure, at elevated temperatures, and at reduced pressure at elevated temperatures ~~and/or at elevated temperatures~~.

9. (Currently Amended): The process as claimed in claim 1, further comprising: moistening the semifinished leather product with an aqueous solution of a tanning assistant which is absorbed into the semifinished leather product by means of a physical force ~~physical forces~~.

10. (Previously Presented): The process as claimed in claim 1, further comprising: resoftening the dried semifinished leather product by treatment with water or with an aqueous solution or suspension of a tanning assistant, to a water content of from 50 to 80%, based on the total weight of the semifinished leather product.

11. (Previously Presented): The process as claimed in claim 2, wherein the chromium-free tanning agent, which is an aldehyde tanning agent, is glutaraldehyde.

12. (Currently Amended): The process as claimed in claim 5, wherein the substances are selected from the group consisting of urea ~~or urea derivatives~~, an alcohol ~~alcohols~~, a polyol ~~polyols~~, a propylene carbonate, an organic amide ~~amides~~, a urethane ~~urethanes~~ and a saccharide ~~saccharides or derivatives of saccharides~~.

13. (Currently Amended): The process as claimed in claim 12, ~~wherein the saccharides or derivatives of saccharides~~ comprising the saccharide, wherein the saccharide is ~~comprising the saccharide~~ [[are]] selected from the group consisting of nitrocellulose, sulfide cellulose and ethylcellulose.

14. (Previously Presented): The process as claimed in claim 7, wherein the bentonite

is a hectorite.

15. (Previously Presented): The process as claimed in claim 9, wherein the drying is carried out on a tenter frame.

16. (Currently Amended): The process as claimed in claim 9, wherein the ~~physical forces comprise~~ physical force comprises osmosis.

17. (Previously Presented): The process as claimed in claim 9, wherein the semifinished leather product is moistened with an aqueous solution of a protein hydrolysis product.

18. (Previously Presented): The process as claimed in claim 10, wherein the tanning assistant is an amphoteric or cationic polymer.

19. (Previously Presented): The process as claimed in claim 10, wherein the resoftening comprises spraying the dried semifinished leather product with the treatment.

20. (New): The process of claim 18, wherein the tanning assistant is a cationic polymer.

21 (New): The process of claim 18, wherein the tanning assistant is an amphoteric polymer.